



Feeding the Poor: Assessing the Efficacy of the Food Voucher Programme in Fiji

Sandhiya Gounder

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ABSTRACT: *The topic of the research is generally about the Food Voucher Program, one of the poverty reduction strategies by the government that has been aimed towards the poor to relieve them out of poverty. The study seeks to get answers from the Nadi recipients only. With Nadi being the hub of tourism, it is alarming to note the growing number of street beggars on the streets, who are recipients of the Food Vouchers. This raises questions on whether the food voucher program is helping them or is it serving as an excuse for them not to look for jobs.*

Systematic sampling and snow ball sampling technique was used to identify respondents for sample. The study used a sample 480 social welfare recipients who also received food vouchers monthly. Data was collected by use of questionnaire designed to identify factors that contributed to the efficacy of the food vouchers. The analysis was presented using frequencies, mean, percentages, skewness, kurtosis and cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of the variables.

The study demonstrates that an average family under the food voucher scheme comprises four members who are allocated \$7.50 per person in the food voucher of thirty dollars value. Therefore, for an average family of four members, the food voucher caters for 36.25% of their food needs. The study shows that for an average family of four, the required food needs are catered for over a period of just two weeks. The study also revealed that the recipients face a lot of problems with the choice of supermarket since it is expensive and the list from which items are chosen to be bought is inefficient.

Keywords: *Food Voucher Programme, Poverty Benefit Scheme, Social Welfare, Fiji*

I. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of the research is to examine the efficacy of the food Voucher Programme in Fiji. The Government aims to solve the most questioned problem of poverty from the country, yet the poverty rate has increased immensely in the past years. The government, under the Ministry of Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation, continuously implements plans to eliminate poverty to the maximum level. Fiji's deepening employment problem is contributing to the nation's burgeoning levels of poverty. The 1997 Fiji Poverty Report which is the analysis of 1990- 1991 survey on poverty shows that 25% of the households lived in poverty, unable to afford a basically adequate standard of living as defined by Fiji standards (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2004). The poverty rate increased from 25.5% in 1990 to 31% in 2009 (The Millenium Development Goals Report, 2015), thus the study looks at Food Voucher programme which is one of the poverty reduction strategy implemented by the Government to help the poor in meeting their food needs.

Fiji's Family Assistance Scheme (Kaitani, 2008) is the main program for poverty alleviation policy in the country. It was established in 1975 as a safety net for those in serious need and, currently, consists of a monthly allowance of FJ\$60-100. In addition, in 2010 Fiji introduced a monthly FJ\$ 30 Food Voucher as an additional social protection measure. This programme is currently being expanded to include eligible elderly, pregnant women and school-going children in remote rural areas.

The government has over the years implemented various poverty alleviation programs to combat the ever burgeoning level of poverty here but current statistics on poverty indicate that these previous attempts by the government to alleviate poverty have been largely unsuccessful (Leweniqila, 2008). Consequently, achieving the MDGs target now seems unlikely or even impossible (2010 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report, 2015). With the level of assistance granted over the years and the continuous increase in the proportion of the poor in the country, it is important to assess and evaluate the programs to ensure their efficiency in meeting the needs of the poor. This thesis therefore provides an overview of the efficiency of the Food Voucher

Program which is directed at the poor to lift them out of poverty. The Food Vouchers complements the Poverty Benefit Scheme.

The Poverty Benefit Scheme has replaced the Family Assistance Program (Department of Social Welfare, 2014). Previously, the eligibility for the welfare assistance under the Family Assistance Program was based on the three criteria: Age, Chronic Illness and Permanent Disability. These criterions were targeted at individuals. However, with the new Poverty Benefit Scheme, household income is the determining factor whereby eligible households can be assisted.

The Poverty Benefit Scheme (PBS) is a software system that is used to make assessments on the eligibility of an applicant to receive assistance from the department of social welfare in the form of cash transfer and cash value for food items. It captures a family's household items and assets including type of land ownership, giving a score at the end of the assessment as to whether or not the family is really poor and should be assisted through the Poverty Benefit Scheme.

Based on the Household, Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), the average members in a household is made up of four, taking the information from this survey the new PBS considers assisting four members in a household (Report on the 2008-2009 Household Income and expenditure Survey for Fiji, 2011). This means that when assessing a case, only four members in the household are included even when there are more than four members in that family. Each of these four family members will be eligible for \$30, which would give them a maximum of \$120 per month. For a household of one, the amount would be \$30, likewise, in a family of two, it would be \$60 and a family of three would receive \$90. Apart from this monthly allowance, an additional \$30 Food Voucher is given to a recipient household, therefore the maximum amount that can be given to a family is only \$150 inclusive of the \$30 Food Voucher. These food vouchers can only be cashed at the selected supermarket in Nadi specified by the government, and the recipients are given a list of items to choose from. The food voucher can only be used to buy the food items in this list.

There has been much debate on the level of poverty in Fiji in relation to its ethnic dimensions as well as the changes in the faces of poverty over time. Regrettably, however, there has been no accurate measure of the problem until Narsey's study. *The Quantitative Analysis of Poverty* (Narsey, 2008) is a seminal and definitive study of poverty with the right methodology. It states that thirty five per cent of all households in Fiji live below the poverty line. This is indeed a high figure and one that should worry everyone. The study found that forty per cent of the rural households were poor, while twenty nine per cent of the urban households live below the poverty line. Another important finding was that the Northern Division was the poorest region in Fiji, with fifty three per cent of its households living below the national poverty line. The national poverty line is \$1.25 per day per headcount.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study used descriptive research design since the study intended to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena or situation in the homes assisted by the Ministry of Social Welfare through the food vouchers. This study was carried out using a quantitative research approach. Some of the variables that were tested included: type of food item bought, quality of food items bought, amount of money allocated and total cost of food needs per month. These were used as independent variables while 'meeting food needs' was the dependent variable. Secondary sources such as the official government statistics were examined. The instrument used in the study was questionnaire; hence the instrumentation process involved designing the questionnaire with closed ended questions and a few open ended questions. There are a total of 685 food voucher recipients in Nadi which in turn was the study population; however 480 respondents gave their consent to participate in the study. Systematic probability sampling method was used for the study so that it allows confidence that the sample is not biased and to estimate how precise the data are likely to be. The analysis was presented using frequencies, mean, percentages, skewness, kurtosis and cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of the variables. To promote ethics in the research, the research informed all respondents about the study including the risks, benefits, reason for research, how the collected data will be used before distributing the questionnaire. The respondents were asked not to put their names on the questionnaire to enhance anonymity and confidentiality. The research asked for voluntary participation from the respondents and no respondents were forced to participate in the research.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Category of Respondents

The study comprised 68% widows, 22% people with disabilities and about 10% pensioners as the respondents.

Average Family Size

Each respondent was asked to give the number of family members in their household. The mean of the family size is 4.19 which indicate that the food voucher value of \$30 is shared by an average of four members in a family which is approximately \$7.50 per person in a month.

Monthly Grocery Expenses/ Household

The study shows that 55% of the recipients' monthly grocery expenses are more than \$100, about 33% show expenses of \$50-\$100 while only 12% indicated less than \$50 a month.

Total Cost of Required Food Needs in a Household/ Month

Everyone settled for what was allocated in the food vouchers but there was a need for the question of 'how much do they actually require for a month'. Thirty two per cent of the recipients' food needs are estimated to be above \$200, thirty nine per cent required \$100 to \$200 and about twenty nine per cent of the respondents indicated a need for about \$50- \$100 worth of monthly food requirement. The respondents believe that their food needs of the whole month can be met only with the specified amount and not less than that.

Average Monthly Expenses/ Household

The average amount of grocery expenses in an average family of four members was calculated using the mean. The mean was 2.43 which was calculated from three options 1: <\$50, 2: \$50-\$100, 3: >\$100, thus the average is calculated by adding 0.43 of \$50 which comes to \$21.50 to \$50 (0.43 is used because the mean is 2.43, thus the value 2 signifies option 2 which is \$50 and .043 of \$50 is calculated and added to \$50 to get the approximate average monthly expenses/ household in dollar value), therefore the monthly grocery expense is calculated to be \$71.50 for a family of four. Looking at the confidence level of 95%, the average monthly grocery expenses are approximately between \$65.50 to \$77.50 which means that according to the study the monthly grocery expenses are not less than \$65.50 and not more than \$77.50.

Average Cost of Food required by a household/ Month

Since the mean was 2.03 when calculated from the three categories (1: \$50-\$100, 2: \$100-\$200, 3: >\$200), it can be concluded that the food needs required by each family per month is \$100-200 and approximately \$103.00.

Percentage of Food Needs Catered by the Food Voucher/ Month

The mean was 1.45 when calculated from the categories >25%, 25%-50%, 50%-75% and 75%-100%. Thus the average percentage of food needs met is 36.25% (1.45 of 25%). Therefore, for an average family of four, the food voucher covers or meets 36.25% of their food needs. With the confidence level of 95%, it can be said that the percentage food needs met by the food voucher lies between 33.5% (1.34 of 25) and 39.25% (1.57 of 25).

Quality and Brand Satisfaction

The satisfaction of the people for the food that they buy from the voucher was measured using two options; 1 depicts that quality and brand is satisfying and 2 depicts non- satisfactory quality and brands. Since the mean is 1.75, it can be said that majority people are not satisfied with the quality and brand of the food items that they buy and consume despite the fact that the study reveals that the voucher meets or satisfies more than thirty per cent of their food needs every month. The standard deviation was 0.435 signifying a lower value which means that the views are similar of the respondents regarding the quality and brand of items brought from the voucher.

Efficiency of the Food Voucher

The response set of 1-5 was constructed, where 1 is strongly disagree, 3 is neutral and 5 is strongly agree. Looking at the mean of the five variables used in this study to measure efficiency of the food voucher; types of food bought, the list of items to choose from, quality, grocery expenses and the need to increase the value of the voucher, the first four variables have a mean of less than 3, which signifies that a majority of the recipients disagree that they (a) are able to buy all types of food, (b) the list which they choose from is efficient, (c) quality is excellent, and that (d) the voucher meets their grocery expenses. However the increase in the mean to almost 4.9 suggests that everyone wants the voucher to be of a higher value. The standard deviations is between 1-2 for all variables which means that the scores or responses are clustered together which depicts that the responses are almost similar.

The skew proves this as well; when the frequent scores are clustered at the lower end of the distribution, the value of skew is positive. Conversely, when the frequent scores are clustered at the higher end

of the distribution, the value of skew is negative for the variable, need to increase the value of the voucher. In other words, a majority of the respondents would like the value of the food voucher to be increased.

FV Ensures all Type of Items to be Bought

A total of 57% people do not agree that they are able to buy all types of required food items under the food voucher. This suggests that there can be an influence of ethnicity on the preference of food items by the respondents.

Efficiency of the FV List

However, a total of 71% people believe that the list from which they choose the food items to buy is not sufficient, in other words, the items that the respondent prefers to buy are not included in the list. Nonetheless, they tend to buy whatever they are eligible to as listed in the voucher.

Quality of the Food Items is Excellent

Almost three quarters of the total number of respondents believe that the quality of food which they get under the food voucher is disheartening as the table above shows that more than seventy percent disagree with the idea that the quality of food items in the list is the best. However the study also reveals that 16.7% believe that the quality is excellent. 9.8 % respondents neither agree nor disagree that the quality is excellent.

Food Voucher Meets Monthly Grocery Expenses/ Household

Approximately thirty per cent of the respondents believe that the food voucher meets their monthly grocery expenses while the remaining 71.2 per cent have to look for other alternatives to meet their food needs every month since their monthly grocery expenses are not fully met by the voucher. This suggests that panhandling or begging on the streets is one of these alternatives to meeting their food needs for the month- this could explain the increase in the number of beggars or panhandlers in town.

Value of the Voucher

There is a strong indication that almost everyone is hoping for an increase in the value of the food voucher from \$30, as a total of ninety five per cent people are supporting the increase.

Number of Weeks catered by the Voucher/ Household

The mean of 1.74 was calculated from three responses; 1: 1-2weeks, 2: 2-3 weeks and 3: 3-4weeks, thus, the food needs of an average family of four members are catered for about two weeks from the food voucher. In relation to this, how the food needs of the respondents for the rest of the month is not known.

Satisfaction of the Meal Content

Sixty four per cent of the respondents were not satisfied with what they were given under the voucher. However thirty six per cent are satisfied with their meal contents while a mere five percent believe that the meal content is excellent.

Satisfaction Level of the Food Voucher

To measure the satisfaction level of the food voucher four variables were used: (a) whether the food voucher meets all the food needs of the respondents, (b) do they feel full and satisfied with the meals they eat three times a day throughout the month; (c) was the incidence of hunger and malnutrition reduced and, (d) does the food voucher provide nutritional meals. The responses had the ratings from 1-5, [1: strongly disagree, 3: neutral and 5: strongly agree]. The mean of all the variables is less than 2.5, in other words, the satisfaction level measured by the four variables is low and this indicates that the food voucher does not meet the full monthly food needs of the people. A smaller value of the standard deviation indicates that the responses are clustered together and not far away from other scores. Thus this means that the respondents' views are similar and not very different from each other.

Distributions also vary in their pointedness or kurtosis. Kurtosis or pointedness refers to the degree to which the scores cluster in the tails (end) of the distributions. In a normal distribution the values of skew and kurtosis are 0. If a distribution has values of skew or kurtosis above or below 0, then this indicates a deviation from normal. In this case, the distribution graph is skewed to the left and is well confirmed by the positive skew values indicating that the frequent scores are clustered at the lower end of the distribution indicating that the respondents do not agree with the four variables used to measure the satisfaction level of the food voucher.

FV meets all Food Needs in a Household/ Month

A large number of the respondents strongly disagreed that the food voucher meets all their food needs in a month. However fifteen per cent are very satisfied that all food needs are met by the voucher and their response needs to be considered in light of the fact that this fifteen percent may have a smaller number of members in their families supported by the food voucher. Some families who are under the food voucher have more than four members in the family. In such case the family will have fewer meals to cater for all the members.

Content Meals throughout the Month

Only a quarter of the recipients are able to indicated that the voucher caters for content or full plate meals throughout the month while the other seventy five percent are not able to meet their food needs under the voucher.

Incidence of Hunger and Malnutrition

Although almost seventy per cent do not agree that the incidence of hunger and malnutrition has been reduced by the food voucher, around thirty percent consent that it has tremendously reduced the number of times that they had to go without food.

Food Voucher caters for Nutritional Meals

A majority of the respondents are not satisfied with the nutritional content of the food provided by the voucher. This may be due to the lack of choices of food items that can be bought under the food voucher. However 21.2 % believe that the food catered by the voucher is nutritional.

Important Food items Bought from FV

When asked to state the five important items that the respondents buy from the food voucher, the following were stated by the respondents; dhal, tea, rice, tuna flakes, oil, noodles, tea, flour and biscuits. However if cash was given instead of the voucher the items that they preferred to buy were soap powder, sugar, meat (chicken, lamb, sausages, fresh fish), FMF biscuits 2KG bucket, milk powder, vegetables, rice (sunwhite calrose), weetbix, fruits, Milo/ Cocoa, soap, toilet paper, oats, butter, coned mutton/ beef and tin fish.

Major Problems faced by the Recipients

The results denote that most of the recipients the list does not contain most of the food items that they prefer to buy to satisfy their food needs. The choice of supermarkets was also stated as another problem faced by the recipients as they believe that the supermarket is very expensive. However a few faced problems with the Social welfare Department in terms of how the voucher is distributed. The respondents also stated ethnicity as another obstacle because the food preference of the two major ethnic group in Fiji is very different from each other.

Reliability Statistics

Seven variables: [sufficiency of the list in the FV, food quality, monthly grocery expenses, meeting all food needs, satisfaction of the meals throughout the month, incidence of hunger and malnutrition and nutritional meals] were used to test the reliability of the study. Cronbach's alpha was **0.975**, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for the scale with this study. The removal of any of this variable resulted in a lower Cronbach's alpha, therefore none of these variables were removed.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poverty is something many people are at risk of experiencing at some point in their lives. Thus efforts to reduce poverty seem more important than ever for the Fiji Government but the anticipated results from the initiatives under the Ministry of Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation such as the Food Voucher Scheme have not had the anticipated impact. The various programs of poverty alleviation have not translated into poverty reduction. This thesis has aimed to review the extent to which food needs are met by the food vouchers.

The study demonstrates that an average family under the food voucher scheme comprises four members who are allocated \$7.50 per person in the food voucher of thirty dollars value. The average monthly expense for each family is approximately \$71.50 which lies between intervals of \$65.50 to \$77.50. The study also reveals that for an average family, the monthly cost required to meet all the foods needs is \$50 - \$100 but with the limited finance available, they cater for important food items with \$71.50.

For an average family of four, the required food needs are catered for over a period of just two weeks. But on the other hand, it is impressive that it caters for their food needs for over half a month thereby easing their burden to meet their food needs for the whole month by themselves. Therefore the study reveals that for an average family of four members, the food voucher caters for 36.25% of their food needs. It is also revealed that

the brand and quality of food items bought are unsatisfactory, the list given by the Ministry of Social Welfare from which people choose the food items is not sufficient i.e. they cannot buy all food items with the voucher. However, the study shows that the voucher meets all the monthly grocery expenses for approximately 30% of the recipients. The study strongly indicates that the recipients are hoping for an increase in the value of the voucher. It is also disclosed in the study that the satisfaction level of the meals from the voucher is low, not all monthly food needs of the families are met and the nutritional value is low, however the incidence of hunger and malnutrition has been reduced vastly.

As it has been identified in the literature and the empirical research, there are a number of factors hampering the food voucher in meeting the food needs of the recipients. This study has revealed that one of the most significant obstacles for poverty reduction is the ethnic-background that determines the dietary patterns of the individuals. I-taukei's prefer food rich in starch, a more tuber and coconut based diet while Fijians of Indian descent prefer legumes and grains-based food. It needs noting that the preferred I-taukei diets are not available on the shelves of the supermarket but rather, these have to be bought from the markets on cash. This leaves them with no other choice but to buy these staples from the market since these recipients do not own any land. Thus the extent to which the voucher meets the needs for the I-taukeis' diminishes whereas, Fijians of Indian descent can better satisfy their food needs via the food vouchers.

The choice of supermarket is also one of the major problems faced by the people. According to the respondents, the supermarket identified by the Ministry is expensive when compared to other supermarkets in Nadi. However, friendly customer service and fast processing of the food vouchers were deemed as advantages. The list from which the respondents could choose the food items is believed to be very insufficient as the list is limited to only a few types of food items. The respondents claim that it is not permissible for them to buy food items of the best quality. Sixty four percent of the respondents are not satisfied with what they are given under the voucher. However thirty six percent are satisfied with their meal contents which include a mere 5% who believe that the meal content is excellent. Conversely, it is still questionable whether the recipients would have bought the best quality of the food items if the food voucher was not there to support them in meeting the food needs.

Considering that all respondents in this research have similar perceptions and experiences regarding the use of food vouchers, it is evident that the food voucher meets the needs of the poor and helps them relieve the extent of poverty they are facing to at least some level if not entirely. But on the other hand, the food voucher is complementing the Poverty Benefit Scheme which provides cash of \$30 to each member of the family up to four members under the scheme. Therefore it can be concluded that the food voucher alone cannot meet all food needs of the people for the whole month as this study finds that it caters for just over two weeks of food needs but when the voucher is added to the amount of money they receive under the Poverty Benefit Scheme, the recipients' can meet all their food needs in a month. In other words, the food voucher is at least supplementing the cash that is given to the respondents.

This research has studied the efficiency of the food vouchers in meeting the needs of the poverty stricken in Nadi. During the study, it became apparent that there were various other areas that would be interesting for further investigations. This study has examined the efficiency of the food vouchers for the Nadi recipients, but the outcome could be different for other localities within Fiji. Consequently, it would be interesting to compare the efficiency of the food vouchers in other locations around Fiji. Further research could therefore be carried out in other locations to compare the situation throughout the country. An additional area for research could be to study how people are able to cater for the rest of other needs such as shelter and clothing and what proportion of assistance they get from other non- governmental organizations.

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